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U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-10th, of Highland Park, will make a special delivery to the troops serving in Iraq this holiday season.

Kirk is traveling to Iraq with other members of Congress to evaluate the progress the country is making in preparation for national elections scheduled for January. During his visit, Kirk will personally deliver holiday cards and letters to U.S. servicemen and women stationed in Iraq.

"I'll be taking the letters with me to Baghdad to make sure they get their letters before the (Christmas) holidays," said Kirk, during a press conference at the Vernon Hills Police Department last week where he discussed local efforts to support service personnel overseas, especially those in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"It makes all the difference in the world for these soldiers to get a letter from home, especially during the holidays," he said.

### **Mailing deadline**

The deadline for mailing a card or letter to soldiers in Iraq for the holidays has already passed, but Kirk's mission gave military families and friends from the area another chance to make sure their letters arrived on time. However, all letters and cards must be received in Kirk's office in Deerfield by noon today (Thursday).

Kirk said he was not sure how many letters his office would receive.

"I will take over as many as will fit in a C-130," said Kirk, referring to the military cargo plane he will travel in during his mission to Iraq.

Kirk also will deliver approximately 20 boxes of care items for the troops assembled by the Republican Women of Wheeling organization.

Kirk would not discuss details on exactly when he would be traveling to Iraq for security reasons. However, Kirk said the main purpose of his visit is to monitor preparations for the upcoming elections in Iraq, scheduled for Jan. 30.

"In past conflicts in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Afghanistan, elections have been a turning point. Once a democratically elected government is in place, conflict generally subsides considerably," he said.

During last week's press conference, Kirk also highlighted the work local organizations and volunteers have done to support the troops, in particular the efforts of the Vernon Hills Police Department.

### **Blue line responds**

The Vernon Hills Police Department recently adopted two military units serving abroad -- the U.S. Army National Guard 106th Aviation Battalion in Iraq and the U.S. Marine Corps HMH 462 in Afghanistan. Through a program called "Blue Line for the Front Line," a total of 112 boxes of care items already have been shipped to the troops abroad, said Vernon Hills Police Chief Mark Fleischhauer.

"We've shipped out over 4,300 pounds of supplies," he said.

Among the items that have been sent include wipes, candy and chewing gum, DVDs and sporting goods. The last packages sent in early November included Christmas stockings for all 200 members of the two military units. Fleischhauer said they will continue sending packages until the units return home.

"The e-mails we've received back from the servicemen and women have been extremely appreciative and thankful for what we've done," he said.

The Libertyville Police Department has joined in the program, serving as a drop-off location for residents wishing to donate items, and has collected both goods and money to support the troops. Recently, Libertyville police received a \$5,000 donation from an anonymous donor, which will be used to purchase T-shirts to be sent to the soldiers overseas, said Libertyville Police Chief Patrick Carey.